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David Price: A History of Advocating for First Responders, Preparedness

On the House Floor today, US Rep. David Price (NC-04) spoke out about former FEMA Director Michael Brown and the federal response to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Price made his remarks during debate on the Motion to Instruct Conferees on HR 2640, the Homeland Security Appropriations bill.

Price is a member of the Homeland Security Appropriations subcommittee, and he has been railing against cuts for first responder funding and natural disaster preparedness for several years.

The text of his remarks follows:

"Mr. Speaker, I rise today in favor of the motion to instruct conferees to reject Secretary Chertoff's plan to further weaken and gut FEMA.

"I and many of my colleagues have been raising these concerns about the systematic deconstruction of FEMA and about reduced funding for our first responders for several years now. Current and former FEMA officials told me months ago that FEMA had become a hollowed-out agency, and that it was one major disaster short of collapse. Unfortunately, Katrina was the disaster that substantiated that claim.

"We should not be satisfied in laying the blame solely on the former FEMA director. Two years ago FEMA put out a warning that two thirds of our fire departments operate with staffing levels that do not meet the minimum safe staffing levels required by OSHA and the National Fire Protection Association. What was the administration's response? It proposed zeroing out the SAFER hiring program for firefighters and proposed massive cuts to FIRE equipment grants, which FEMA officials had publicly called one of the "best bangs for the buck the tax payer gets."

"Overall, we are providing less funding for our first responders now through FEMA and the Department of Justice than we did prior to 9/11. When I asked Secretary Ridge two years ago why this administration was cutting funding for police and other first responders, his response was that supporting local law enforcement was not the federal government's responsibility...no matter that they were the lynchpin in all of the Department of Homeland Security's planning.

"Time and again, we have also warned of the dangers of moving away from an all-hazards approach to preparedness and response, to a terrorism-only approach.

"FEMA used to be one of the leanest, most effective agencies in the federal government. But then its cabinet-level position was taken away. It was buried under tons of Homeland Security bureaucracy. Its top posts were stripped of experts and filled with campaign workers and friends of people in power. Some of its best programs were taken away and stuffed into other offices in Homeland Security.

"As Former Director Mike Brown testified yesterday, FEMA was de-prioritized in Homeland Security and lost its political power, access, and funding. Its failure after Katrina was the result of a series of decisions to under-fund key agency functions, to cut key personnel, and to deemphasize preparation for natural disasters. That failure had dire consequences.

"I'm not saying this to play the political blame game. I'm saying this because we have to understand that this was a consequence of years of neglect of FEMA and our first responders by this administration and this Congress. We need to understand that so we don't repeat those same mistakes.

"Instead of learning from the mistakes of FEMA, DHS appears intent on plowing ahead with plans to further bury FEMA in the departmental bureaucracy and strip it of its planning and preparedness responsibilities. Republican leaders of this House seem inclined to go along with that, but our vote today will show whether politics and partisanship will trump sound policy.

"We exist as an institution to do more than stay in power. We have to do what is right for the American people. Further dismantling and burying FEMA is wrong. Further cutting funding and

support for our first responders is wrong.

"When we make decisions that are based on a refusal to admit a mistake -- rather than a determination to learn from one -- Americans suffer and we lose some of our greatness. And so I ask my colleagues to support the motion to instruct.

"Things are bad enough. We should not make them worse."

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